



**SECRETARIAT OF NATIONAL ABORIGINAL AND ISLANDER CHILD CARE INC
SNAICC**

Briefing Paper 2007

***Priorities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children
for the Next Term of Government***

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Background on SNAICC

The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care, SNAICC, is the national peak body in Australia representing the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

SNAICC was formally established in 1981 after Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at, “The First Aboriginal Child Survival Seminar” held in Melbourne in 1979 proposed the creation of such a body. The organisation elected its first national executive in 1982 and opened its office after first receiving Federal Government funding support in 1983. 2003 marked SNAICC’s 20th anniversary.

The first Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agencies, AICCAs, SNAICC’s founding members, developed following a study trip to the United States by the late (Auntie) Mollie Dyer from the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service.

Inspired by the success of Native Americans in reducing the rate of child removal, and in particular the Yakima Indian Nation, Mollie returned to Australia to establish the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, VACCA. Soon afterwards the NSW Aboriginal Children’s Service was formed in Redfern and South Australia AICCA in Adelaide with these new bodies becoming a model and source of inspiration for the establishment of similar agencies across Australia.

SNAICC now operates from a membership base of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community based child care agencies, Multi-functional Aboriginal Children’s Services, family support services, foster care agencies, link up and family reunification services, family group homes, community groups and voluntary associations, long day care child care services, pre schools, early childhood education services and services for young people at risk.

In addition to these members SNAICC has a network and subscriber list of over 1400 community groups, mostly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, but also significant numbers of non-Indigenous community based services and individuals with an interest in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children.

SNAICC is governed by a national executive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people drawn from our members and operates from an office located in Melbourne with thirteen staff.

Some recent and typical activities

Key milestones in SNAICC's commitment to serving the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families have included:

- Bringing to national prominence the story of the ‘Stolen Generations’ when in 1991 SNAICC was the first national Indigenous organisation to call for a national inquiry into the ‘Stolen Generations’
- Production of *Through Black Eyes – Family Violence Resource Handbook* in 1991 and 1992
- Development of National Aboriginal and Islander Children’s Day (NAICD) (August 4th each year), as a major annual event celebrated by communities throughout Australia.
- Representing the rights and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations in 1998 and 2000
- Research and production of the *Proposed Plan of Action for Child Abuse and Neglect in Aboriginal Communities* in 1996
- Convening the second National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Survival conference in June 1997.
- Publication in 2002 of *Through Young Black Eyes*, a national resource booklet and community elders guide responding to issues of family violence and child abuse in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. (updated in 2005);

- Convening a major national seminar with the Commonwealth, ATSIC and the Victorian Government in 2003, *Our Future Generations – The National Indigenous Child Welfare & Development Seminar*.
- Research and publication of a paper on child abuse and neglect in the Northern Territory, *State of Denial – the Neglect and Abuse of Indigenous Children in the Northern Territory*
- Publication of 30 early childhood case studies from Indigenous communities across Australia to highlight the positive work of Indigenous family and children's services.
- Establishment in 2004 of the SNAICC Resource Service which facilitates, funds and supports the development of resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait early childhood and child and family welfare agencies.

SNAICC Newsletter and Membership

SNAICC produces a quarterly newsletter with information on issues of direct relevance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, services working with them and organisations or individuals with an interest in children's rights.

A copy of SNAICC's latest newsletter is attached.

Information regarding subscriptions to the SNAICC newsletter or membership of SNAICC should be directed to the SNAICC Secretariat.

The Need for a National Response to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Welfare and Development

In SNAICC's view the Australian Government must take up the responsibility of leading a strong national response to improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's welfare and development.

In May 2006 intense media interest in the welfare of Aboriginal children brought the abuse and neglect of Aboriginal children in some remote communities to the fore. The general community's awareness of the poor life chances of many Aboriginal children was raised and action was expected from the Federal and Northern Territory governments.

There was some Federal Government action in response including the *Inter-governmental Summit on Violence and Child Abuse in Indigenous Communities* in June 2006 and subsequent \$130 million package including the establishment of the *National Indigenous Violence and Child Abuse Intelligence Task Force*. In the Northern Territory an *Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in Indigenous Communities* was announced.

In SNAICC's view these actions must be significantly built upon in the lead up to the next federal election. Significant commitments for the next term of government must be made to start a national effort to improve the lives and futures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. These commitments must be backed by public education about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children that focuses on their rights and health, developmental and educational needs.

National action is needed because state and territory programs are insufficient, uncoordinated and inadequately monitored. SNAICC has long been concerned that despite many improvements and isolated examples of good programs, responses of states and territories to the welfare needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are inadequate and unreliable in many parts of the country. The media showed graphically that far too many children are being abused and living in fear and trauma. Some are dying and many are not receiving proper nutrition, health care or education. The Commonwealth and states and territories must work together to change a picture that has become a national shame, and this working together must be initiated, led and resourced by the Federal Government.

The Federal Government must also attend to the targeting, reach and effectiveness of its own programs within the Department of Families and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. If Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander families and children are missing out on services such as child care and family support that are direct Commonwealth responsibilities this must be acknowledged and responded to.

No political party in Australia has ever made the welfare of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children a central part of its Indigenous Affairs policy. Energy has instead been directed to issues such as health and Native Title and benefits have flowed indirectly to children, but meeting their welfare and developmental needs has not been the central policy goal. SNAICC's view is that it is time to make Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children the central issue in Indigenous Affairs.

Key commitments sought by SNAICC for the next term of government.

1. National Action Plan and National Indigenous Children's Welfare and Development Taskforce

The key commitment SNAICC is seeking in the lead up to the next federal election is to develop a nationally planned response to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's welfare and development.

SNAICC suggests that the best mechanism to organise, monitor and resource this national response is:

- i) to develop a **National Action Plan for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Welfare and Development**
- ii) to establish a **National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Welfare and Development Taskforce** under COAG, to develop, monitor and report against the Action Plan.

Planning for the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families is currently inadequately thought-through, ad hoc and uncoordinated. Unless a better-planned response to the urgent problems confronting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families is developed no real progress in this area will be made and research and investigative journalism will continue to reveal Australian children whose circumstances and life chances shame us all.

The Action Plan and Taskforce must be led and resourced by the Federal Government but must involve state and territory governments and community based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations.

The Action Plan should include state, territory and Federal Government program responsibilities. The Action Plan should be the mechanism by which the Taskforce coordinates state/territory and Commonwealth spending so that service models on the ground meet the full range of needs of local communities.

State and territory responsibilities are not covered in this briefing but the potential of Commonwealth spending plans to negotiate state/territory spending commitments should be acknowledged as an additional benefit of a joint planning approach.

Key Federal Government commitments sought for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families and which SNAICC would want included within the Action Plan are listed below.

The commitments listed below reflect the content of SNAICC's key policy framework documents:

- i) ***Seven Priorities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Families.*** This was developed as an outcome of SNAICC's 2003 National Conference Our Future Generations. This policy statement has been in the public domain for the past two years and has been circulated widely by SNAICC. (see Attachment 1).
- ii) ***Achieving Stable and Strong Out of home Care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children*** (see Attachment 2.)

- iii) **2007–2009 SNAICC Strategic Plan** (See Attachment 3.).

Budget estimates have been provided where relevant. SNAICC would like to talk about the specifics of these commitments in the near future and can provide further information at that time.

2. A National Apology for the Stolen Generations and their families.

A national apology, which acknowledges the harsh injustices of past child removals, and the ongoing impact of these on the health, happiness, and parenting skills of current generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is seen by SNAICC as a foundation upon which the success of many other initiatives will depend. SNAICC's view is that when we fail to recognise how the past lives on, we allow the injustices of the past to continue.

Child removal and the economic, social and political segregation of Aboriginal people throughout Australia, for a period of a hundred years or more, laid the foundations for the unemployment, poverty, homelessness, poor educational access and family dysfunction which many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience today. The needs for a National Apology will assist both the Indigenous community, and the broader Australian community to have faith in the Government's integrity in the area of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and family welfare. A National Apology was identified by the 2003 SNAICC conference as a key priority.

3. Development of an Indigenous Family Support and Parenting Program (\$11 million per annum).

Both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and family welfare services and child care services are seeking to broaden their service delivery into the family support and parenting areas.

Funding is needed to enable child and family welfare services to provide preventative and early intervention services to meet the needs of people who may otherwise be at risk of neglecting or abusing their child or who may have already have had one child removed and need assistance with the other children in the family. In the child care area, funding is needed so that child care services can provide a more holistic response to the families that bring their children to child care centres of all types. Gaps in current service delivery identified by child care providers include: parenting programs and Indigenous parenting and child rearing information, intensive home based family support, family respite, mediation and relationship services, promotion of the importance of the early years and prenatal period with emphasis on critical issues such as Fetal alcohol syndrome, nutrition and children's developmental milestones.

(Note: \$11 million per annum would fund approximately 110 Indigenous family support workers based at Indigenous child and family welfare services and Indigenous child and family services providing child care and early childhood programs. The workers have been costed at approximately \$100,000 each)

4. Funding for facilitated playgroups for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (\$5 million per annum).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander playgroups linked to existing child care, maternal and child health or child and family welfare services create opportunities for families to access information and support in relation to child health and development. They also provide a mechanism to reach out to families for whom centre based care is not appropriate, acceptable or available. Playgroups that are facilitated by a trained staff member provide children with some of the benefits of centre based child care including the capacity for their health, development and early intervention needs to be met and responded to.

(Note: \$5million per annum would fund approximately 50 facilitated playgroups costing at approximately \$100,000 each.)

5. Development of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing and Well Being Program (\$4 million per annum)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families affected by the trauma of previous child removals and family violence require support to heal and recover. All governments should have a role in this and the Federal Government should provide an initial commitment and seek additional commitments from states and territories. Funded activities should include programs addressing familial sexual abuse with elements to address the needs of the victim, the other children in the family, the non-abusing parent and the abusing parent; community education programs for young children in protective behaviours to lessen the chances of them becoming victims, education for young people in protective behaviours, sexual health, life choices, and self esteem, and funding for traditional healing centres.

(Note: \$4 million per annum would fund approximately 40 counsellors or other health and well being workers costing at approximately \$100,000 each)

6. Development and funding of a National Indigenous Child Care Strategy (\$23 million per annum additional funding)

SNAICC has called for a National Indigenous Child Care Strategy for many years and was pleased that the Government responded in 2005 by employing consultants to identify the child care needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and the barriers to having these needs met. (For background information about SNAICC's views on Indigenous child care policy issues please see the document: *Response Paper for the Broadband Redevelopment* (Attachment 4). A detailed draft consultants report was produced by May 2006 following extensive consultations across the country. This research must now be published and feed into the development of a strategy that results in planned improvements in child care availability, appropriateness and quality for Indigenous children and families. The immediate child care priorities that SNAICC wants a Strategy to address are to:

- Recognise that purpose of child care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families is more broadly focussed on supporting children's development and supporting families to care for their children and that the current number of Indigenous specific child care places meets only a small fraction of the need.
- Recognise that multi-functional Indigenous specific child care is the only appropriate form of child care for many Indigenous families and that this form of child care needs to be supported and expanded across the country.
- Immediately expand the capacity of current Indigenous specific child care services
- Immediately establish new multi-functional Indigenous specific child care services in areas of high need:
- Develop a separate Child Care Accreditation process for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander childcare services and programs recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander approaches to child rearing and parenting.
- Respond to the workforce development and training needs of the Indigenous child care sector.

(Note: SNAICC estimates the capital costs of constructing a new multifunctional Indigenous child care centre as \$1M. Recurrent costs for a 60 place multi-functional Indigenous LDC centre are approximately \$600,000 per annum net of fees collected. Existing centres all face additional wage costs of approximately \$60,000 (full effect by September 2008) and are cutting services to meet this commitment further eroding their multi-functional service model. Existing centres require capital upgrade requirements and these needs must be balanced with the construction of new centres in locations without services.)

7. National Indigenous Children's Services Workforce Development Plan (\$8 million over 5 years)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers in Indigenous child care and child and family welfare services do not have adequate opportunity or support to access appropriate accredited training. As a result, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services, particularly those in remote communities, struggle to recruit and retain skilled workers and meet licensing requirements. Nationally accredited training needs to be developed and staff within services need to be provided with adequate support to undertake accredited training modules. A proposal to develop nationally accredited training for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers in the Community Services Industry has been developed by SNAICC in partnership with the Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council. This training development project should be funded (\$2 million over two years) and the training then funded to meet the needs of the sector (\$6 million over 3 years).

8. Re-funding of the SNAICC Resource Service (\$1 million per annum ongoing)

SNAICC was granted four million dollars over four years (2004/05–2007/08) to establish and manage the SNAICC Resource Service (SRS). The SRS was funded under the Australian Government's National Agenda for Early Childhood and the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. SRS projects resource and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services to deliver programs focussed on child abuse prevention, early intervention, family support and early childhood development. The SRS is making a real difference to the quality and relevance of the resources Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood and child and family welfare organizations have access to. SRS funding has also enhanced SNAICC's capacity across all areas of our operations.

9. Development of national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander out of home care standards and legislation.

Federal Government leadership is required to develop National Standards that ensure that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who have involvement with state and territory child protection systems and potentially require out of home care are guaranteed that their rights are consistently protected, including their right to know their extended family and community and to cultural and spiritual development as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders. Further detail about the need for national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Out of Home Care Standards is available in the attached publication *Achieving Stable and Culturally Strong Out of home Care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children*. (see Attachment 2.)

10. National monitoring of the implementation of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle

The Aboriginal Child Placement Principle has been in place for over twenty years now but its implementation is inadequate and inconsistent across the country. The Principle was designed to ensure that Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children that needed to be removed from home were kept connected to their family, community and culture to the maximum extent possible, but compliance with the Principle is very poor in most states and territories.

Broad monitoring of compliance by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare shows that out of home care placements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children within the child's extended family (that is in accordance with the first priority of the Principle) is achieved in only 49 per cent of cases in Western Australia, 34 per cent of cases in Queensland and 20 per cent of cases in Victoria. Total placements in accordance with any of the priorities of the Principle was achieved in 81 per cent of cases in Western Australia, 63 per cent of cases in Queensland and 62 per cent of cases in Victoria. In Tasmania, only 12 per cent of the 47

children in out of home care were living with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander relative or care giver.¹

The responsibility to closely monitor compliance with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle by states and territories needs to be taken up by the Federal Government through the recommended **National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Welfare and Development Taskforce**. National leadership is needed to investigate barriers to compliance by states and territories and provide resources and incentives to improve compliance.

SNAICC Views on the Management of Indigenous Affairs at the National Level

SNAICC believes that history has shown that services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people cannot be made acceptable, culturally relevant and effective without Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership. Without national leadership to drive far reaching service reforms Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children will continue to face an uncertain and difficult future.

Regional and national representative bodies to which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are elected through an open and transparent process are essential if our people are to take the lead in shaping the policies, services and legislation that affect our children.

In 2003 SNAICC celebrated twenty years of successful operation, a success made possible we believe because our decision-making executive committee is comprised of A&TSI people who are elected by and representative of A&TSI service providers across the country.

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Welfare and Development Taskforce proposed above should, have representation from SNAICC and other Aboriginal and Islander peak bodies including National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO).

SNAICC also supports a national elected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander body working in partnership with the Federal Government to improve policy, planning and co-ordination of investment in the futures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across all portfolio areas. SNAICC would welcome the opportunity to comment on options to develop structures to allow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to share decision making at the national level.

¹ AIHW (2005) *Child Protection Australia 2003-04, Child Welfare Series No. 36* Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.2005 Page 51

List of Attachments

Attachment 1

SNAICC, 2004, *Seven Priorities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Families*, SNAICC, Northcote

Available from the SNAICC website

<http://snaicc.asn.au/news/documents/Sevenpriorities.pdf>

Attachment 2

SNAICC, 2005, *Achieving Stable and Culturally Strong Out of Home Care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children*, SNAICC, North Fitzroy

Available from the SNAICC website

http://www.snaicc.asn.au/publications/documents/Stable_strong_web.pdf

Attachment 3

SNAICC, 2006, *2007–2009 SNAICC Strategic Plan*, SNAICC, North Fitzroy

Available from the SNAICC website

<http://www.snaicc.asn.au/publications/documents/StrategicPlan0709web.pdf>

Attachment 4

SNAICC, 2003, *Response Paper for the Broadband Redevelopment*

Available from the SNAICC website

http://www.snaicc.asn.au/news/pdfs/response-paper_apr-2003.PDF